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Spring 2017, Alum Receives Prestigious MEXT Scholarship / Plans for Career in Japan Studies

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Recommended Citation

McKenzie, Cory, "Spring 2017, Alum Receives Prestigious MEXT Scholarship / Plans for Career in Japan Studies" (2017).
International Educator: the Newsletter of the UNH Global Engagement. 238.
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UNH Global

Alum Receives Prestigious MEXT Scholarship / Plans for Career in Japan Studies

Cory McKenzie '15

Friday, March 10, 2017

At the University of New Hampshire, I triple-majored in history, philosophy, and the classics. After hearing my majors, many are surprised to learn that I hope not to become a scholar of classical Europe, but of Japan. I had several transformative experiences in Japan as a UNH student and, in April, I will return to Japan to begin studies in medieval Japanese literature at Kobe University, funded by a research scholarship from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

MEXT scholars are placed at a university in Japan and work under the guidance of a professor in their chosen field. Although this scholarship begins as a two-year research grant, students who wish to continue their studies in a degree program may extend the scholarship for up to four additional years if they pass the entrance exams for their university's master's and doctoral programs.



Cory at Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto

The opportunity to live and study in Japan for several years is a veritable dream come true—a dream that began with an accidental encounter with Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*, an eleventh-century Japanese literary classic, which I stumbled across when I was eleven years old.

Homeschooled, I often accompanied my mother to the library to hunt down new school books. One scorching summer afternoon, while she picked out our next book on Ancient Egypt, I felt repelled by the pictures of the hot Egyptian deserts and wandered over to the novels on the opposite side of the building. A thick paperback with the unusual name Murasaki Shikibu written across the binding caught my eye. I took it off the shelf and peeked inside. Enchanted by the medieval Japanese illustrations sprinkled throughout the volume, I checked it out and began voraciously reading it every night, often waking up the next morning to find it still lying open upon my pillow.



Boatmen in Himeji Castle moat during Cherry Blossom Festival season

Inspired by *Genji*, I studied Japanese in high school. At UNH, I continued my study of the language with Professor Pamela Ikegami. In addition to her regular classes, I did an independent study with her on Endo Shusaku's novel, *Silence*, recently transformed into a film by Martin Scorsese.

In my other classes, I studied the Greek and Latin classics and their central place in Western history and thought, and I became curious about what influence they might have had in Japan. This curiosity led me to discover *Yuriwaka*, a little-known Japanese legend that closely resembles Homer's *Odyssey*. Due to its similarities to the *Odyssey*, scholars have debated for more than a century whether *Yuriwaka* was a native narrative or a foreign import. Funded by the UNH Hamel Center's IROP grant, I spent the summer of 2013 in Kobe, Japan, investigating *Yuriwaka* and the debate surrounding its origins.

After my sojourn in Kobe, I wanted to return to Japan to further experience its fascinating culture and to become more fluent in the language. In 2014, I became one of the pioneers of UNH's new student exchange program with Saitama University, less than an hour outside of Tokyo. During my year at Saitama, I was able to pursue my studies of Classical Japanese and Japanese literature further than I could have at UNH. Living so close to Tokyo, I frequented performances of traditional



Cory at Ise on island of Honshū, Japan

Noh and Kabuki plays that I was reading in my classes—an experience I never could have had back home in New Hampshire.

After graduating from UNH, I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the modern Japanese political scene, which led me to apply to the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace in Washington, DC, as a Junior Fellow with the Japan program. At Carnegie, I worked as Senior Fellow Jim Schoff's research assistant and co-authored several chapters of his recently

published book, *Uncommon Alliance for the Common Good*, which examines the history of the U.S.-Japan Alliance.

Like many liberal arts majors, I am often asked what type of work I might do with my expertise in dusty old books—and how it could possibly translate into a job or be relevant to the twenty-first century. My years of wrestling with the difficult grammar and vocabulary of classical Japanese literary works prepared me well for the historical and legal documents that I studied at Carnegie, and my knowledge of Japan's history and its relations with neighboring countries enabled me to be a critical observer of current events. This experience confirmed for me the value of studying historical Japanese texts, and I now aim to pursue a Ph.D. in Japanese literature so that I can spend my career studying Japan and sharing with others my enthusiasm for this East Asian island nation and its history, language, and culture.

In my upcoming research, I will explore the development of warrior heroes and their virtues throughout Japanese history, starting with medieval texts and working my way to the current day. I hope that this research project will lay the groundwork for my Ph.D. dissertation in the future. I am excited to begin this next step in my journey toward a career in Japan studies—and am grateful to everyone at the University of New Hampshire who has supported and guided me every step of the way along this series of incredible education abroad opportunities.

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